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ABSTRACT

The author maintains that there are two kinds of problems confronting West Indian children in English schools: first, there are the purely linguistic problems that arise from the fact that their native language is unlikely to be English of a kind readily understood by the teacher, the child being similarly unable to understand the teacher; second, there are the psychological problems with their roots in the past history of the West Indies, conditioning the child and his family to resent any suggestion that he has a less-than-perfect command of English or needs special help. He explains briefly the linguistic structure of the Creole dialects or Pidgin English that the children speak, and the relationship of it to British English. He points out that it would be better for teachers of English to avoid trying to suppress the "bad talk" of the children (that is, the Creole vernacular), and to emphasize instead the positive values of learning a socially dominant language. This article is one of three in a booklet published by the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants which provides information about the cultural background of West Indian Immigrant children. (FB)

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Linguistic problems

by Professor R B Le Page

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West Indian children in English schools are likely to have two related sets of problems. First, there are the purely linguistic problems that arise from the fact that their native language is unlikely to be English of a kind readily understood by the teacher, the child being similarly unable readily to understand the teacher; second, there are the psychological problems with their roots in the past history of the West Indies, conditioning the child and its family to resent any suggestion that it has a less-than-perfect command of English or needs special help.

It would be wrong to suggest that the linguistic problem is as severe for West Indian children as it is for Indian children. Most of the West Indian children have far more in common with English children because of their educational background and their environment than do children from the sub-continent. On the other hand, West Indian children are in some ways in a more difficult situation because the language problem is concealed.

(*a*) Creole dialects

In the majority of cases the native language of the immigrant West Indian child and of its family is likely to be a Creole dialect of English; less commonly, it will be a Creole dialect of French. Just occasionally it may be some other language – Spanish, Maya or Carib in the case of an immigrant from British Honduras; Hindi or Tamil in the case of an occasional Trinidadian or Guyanese East Indian. But a Creole or Creolised vernacular is still widely used in the West Indies.

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These Creole dialects have arisen as a result of English or French – the language of the colonising power – being acquired under conditions of duress by West African slaves, possibly influenced by an already existing 16th and 17th century Portuguese Pidgin of the slave coasts of Africa. Speakers of West African languages would hear and re-interpret English or French in terms of the phonemic structure of their own language. Vowel contrasts which existed in English but not in the West African languages would not be heard, nor would they be reproduced; similarly, some consonantal distinctions were lost. Most West African languages such as Twi do not have the same distinctions between long and short vowels that

17th century English had; these distinctions have been modified in modern English, but they were replaced for the West African with the kind of distinction he would have made in his own language. The stress patterns of English which were alien to West African languages were not reproduced, and the tone-patterns of West African languages were to a certain extent carried over into the pronunciation of English.

In pronunciation therefore the Pidgin varieties of English used by the first generations of West African slaves taken to the West Indies had the phonemic contrasts and the stress and intonation patterns of the West African languages rather than those of English. The West African languages do not inflect in the same manner as English, so that the inflectional endings of English were lost; there was no possessive ending, no plural ending; the verb did not change its form in the past tense, the personal pronouns did not change their form to show accusative or possessive case and so on. The grammar of a language is of course simply the method adopted by speakers of that language to arrange morphemes so as to relate them to one another, and the relational devices used by the West African speakers of Pidgin English were to a large extent those of their own languages or simply those of word order.

Many West African idioms were translated into English morphemes: *door-mouth*, for example, is simply a translation of the corresponding West African word. The semantic structure of West African languages was carried over into English, so that for example the division of the body was done according to West African rather than English conceptual analysis although English words were used as labels for the concepts; *foot* means from the thigh down to the bottom of the toes, just as it does in many West African languages, and *foot-bottom* has therefore to be used for what we mean by *foot* in England.

In the West Indies, where the slaves from different parts of West Africa were mixed up together on plantations as a protection against revolt, the Pidgin English or Pidgin French became the lingua franca and subsequent generations of children grew up speaking it as their first language, at which stage linguists call such a language a Creole (the word simply means *locally born*). These Creole languages developed out of their own resources and by borrowing extensively both from the African languages and – more especially – from the model language, usually the language of the European planters.

In those islands such as Barbados where there was in the early stages of plantation a high proportion of Europeans to Negroes the influence of the model language was considerable and brought the Creole dialect much closer to it. In those islands like Jamaica where the Europeans were rapidly outnumbered by Negroes the influence of the model language was far less; Jamaica is in any case a mountainous island and the Creole dialects there have been more conservative than elsewhere. Some of the islands were originally settled by French planters and only ceded to Great Britain at the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th century. In these – the Windward Islands and Trinidad – Creole French was until this century the lingua franca and the present generations have learnt their English from Barbadian schoolmasters.

(*b*) West Indian children in English schools

It must be remembered therefore that West Indian children are suffering from difficulties of *hearing*, in the sense that their framework of reference for the sounds which strike their ears is one of perception according to Creole and not according to English English. They are suffering from difficulties of *understanding*, because even if they hear the words correctly those words and the grammatical constructions in which they are being used may have slightly or even grossly different meanings for them. They are suffering from difficulties of *expressing* themselves, since teachers do not easily understand the mode of speech in which the children are uninhibited, that is their Creole dialect, and if they are attempting to use the teacher's dialect there is a certain degree of inhibition which would tend to make them dry up and keep silent. And they suffer these disabilities within a psychological situation which makes it important to them to insist that they already speak good English.

The psychological or psycho-linguistic problems are of two kinds but both derive from the fact that the West Indian family has been conditioned by the past *morés* of a colonial society in which a white skin, an English accent and the top job all went together and in which the person who wished to get on in the world had to acquire an education through the medium of the model language, which was supposed to be English English.

Schoolteachers spent a great deal of time and energy, in a narrowly prescriptive way on language, saying what was *right* or *correct* and trying to banish what was regarded as 'bad talk' – that is, the Creole vernacular which the children spoke everywhere outside the school – from the classroom. There was a conspiracy of silence among schoolteachers, a refusal to recognise that the vernacular was a language just like any other language, accompanied of course by the fact that West Indian teachers themselves were not always too sure of the model language they were supposed to be teaching and their tendency to fall back upon rules was thereby reinforced. Thus for 300 years in Barbados and in Jamaica and in St Kitts and other parts of the Caribbean an enormous amount of psychological capital has been invested in acquiring so-called correct English as a passport to a better job, higher social status and so on.

West Indians often resent being told that this psychological capital has been mistakenly invested or has depreciated in value; that the insistence on English English was all right in the past when only an élite was getting secondary education, but that it was now necessary to allow West Indian children to make the fullest use of their talents and respond creatively in the schools through the medium of the vernacular.

If it is difficult to change the attitude in the West Indies after Independence, how much more difficult is it to change the attitude of children and their parents when they arrive in England and are surrounded by living proof that the people with the 'best jobs' are the people who speak the 'best' English? But now there is the additional frustration that the command of English so painfully acquired in the West Indies is itself found to be of less value than had been imagined since even educated West Indian English is conservative in comparison with English

English and a number of the phonological, grammatical and of course most of the semantic difficulties of the Creole remain in the educated variety.

Parents will obviously put tremendous pressure on their children to get on in the English educational system, and may well try to conceal any linguistic difficulties the child may be having or may adopt attitudes which will encourage the child to conceal these difficulties by remaining silent in class. Even the suggestion that children might need special treatment in school may be interpreted as a slight to the home background and create a psychological problem.

Teachers in England who have to teach West Indian children need to understand the psychology of the situation. They need sympathetic tolerance and an avoidance of a rigidly prescriptive attitude towards English usage, a willingness to talk to the children to find out whether the meaning they are giving to words is a West Indian meaning, and a willingness to help the child understand that there are two different systems, that of the Creole vernacular and that of English English, and not just one rather muddled system which the child finds it difficult to cope with. Through such means, and through study on the part of the teacher of the linguistic information contained in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, *Jamaican Creole Syntax* and similar books it should be possible to release the West Indian child from many of his fears of misunderstanding and making mistakes.

If they are released in this way it will usually be found that West Indian children have a vividly creative gift with language, and the confidence which the use of this gift will give them will enable them to assimilate very much more easily in other ways.